

Information For Physicians Who Sign (Certify) Death Certificates

- 1. The law specifies which physician must sign.** Tennessee law 68-3-502(c)(1) reads [the death certificate will be signed and medically certified by]...“the physician in charge of the patient’s care for the illness or condition that resulted in death within 48 hours after death”... [Unless it is a medical examiner reportable case and he/she assumes jurisdiction]... This assignment is irrespective of who pronounced death. The physician who is legally responsible for signing the death certificate is normally determined as follows:
 - Hospital In-Patient: Admitting or Attending Physician (to include Hospitalist)
 - Emergency Room Patient: The Emergency Room Physician with medical history obtained from the Primary or Specialty Care Physician. Alternately, Primary and Specialty Care Physicians may be required to certify the death certificate if their professional relationship with the patient is sufficient to meet the legal burden specified in the above definition.
 - Other Medical Facility In-Patient: The Facility Physician.
 - Home Deaths with Hospice Care: The Hospice Physician.
 - Other Home Deaths: The Primary or Specialty Care Physician unless the Medical Examiner assumes jurisdiction.

The law assigns this definition of certifying physician to help grieving families more quickly get death certificates and to ensure that Tennessee has accurate mortality data. The “physician in charge of the patient’s care” can best identify the underlying cause of death and this identification is the core of Tennessee medical statistics. If a death certificate lists mechanisms, symptoms and sequelae rather than primary diseases, our data is skewed and Tennessee loses potential funding for disease treatment and prevention programs.

- 2. When the above-designated physician is not available.** The law states that an associate physician (partner etc.) or the institution Chief Medical Officer may sign the death certificate. When there is a difference of opinion between physicians regarding who must sign, it falls upon the Chief Medical Officer to work out the issue or certify the death certificate himself/herself.
- 3. The items that must be completed by the certifier.** Items 25 – 30. These items include the Cause of Death (one condition or disease process), Other Significant Conditions (if any), the Manner of Death (Natural, Accident etc.), and Autopsy Information. If the manner of death was not natural, injury information in blocks 31 a – f is also required.
- 4. Correcting a death certificate.** Physicians may correct death certificates that they have certified by sending a notarized statement to the Office of Vital Records, stating the items that must be changed.
- 5. How Cause of Death information is processed.** The Cause of Death is coded into International Classification of Disease (ICD 10) format. The resulting data file is analyzed for the Tennessee legislature, U.S. Congress, Centers for Disease Control and others to show which diseases are responsible for the deaths of our citizens; and they allocate funds based upon this data.
- 6. Professional and facility licensure requires compliance with Tennessee law.**